



**MARY BENSON - THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING THE 'SELF'**

**by**

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## Abstract

This study investigates the problem of defining Mary Benson as a person and a writer. Her writing spans a range of generic classifications - biography, history, plays, a novel and an autobiography. Yet, all are centred on her preoccupation with the struggle for freedom in South Africa. All reveal, moreover, a great deal about Benson's own values and commitment, prompting us to question the validity, in her case, of such strict generic categories as useful defining properties in her literary career. Starting with her most recent publication, the autobiography A Far Cry, I shall look at the way she presents herself in a traditionally introspective genre. It soon becomes apparent that Benson views herself within a perspective of South African social reality, and that her sense of self is inextricably linked to her political involvement. Her personal needs and desires, to a large extent, remain unobtrusive as she foregrounds her public interactions and her concern with humanitarian and racial issues. A study of Benson, therefore, needs to address a selection of her work in an attempt to fully appreciate her sense of her own identity. In consequence, I go on to discuss her biography Nelson Mandela and her novel At the Still Point. Both works confirm the portrait in A Far Cry of Benson as a responsible South African who has selflessly and consistently devoted herself to her role as a witness of racial oppression in South Africa. In her biography, Nelson Mandela, for example, the ANC leader emerges as an exemplary figure in the public world while his values and ideals are allowed to parallel Benson's own 'autobiographical' ideals. In At the Still Point, Anne Dawson, Benson's fictional protagonist, I shall argue, gives her author the opportunity to express her own feelings about private life in relation to sociopolitical action. These 'personal' feelings seem to be avoided in the more direct opportunities of the autobiographical form. In exploring Benson's sense of self, therefore, this study suggests that for Benson 'commitment' overrides her sense of herself as a literary figure, and that this has consequences for the weight we give to content and form in

the reading of her work. My conclusion is that we are looking not so much at the challenges of genre as at a large autobiographical project, in which the 'self' is defined substantially in its meetings with other people in political circumstances.

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## Introduction

Prior to February 2 1990, Mary Benson's writings were unavailable to most South Africans. As a banned person, she could not be quoted here and was perhaps best known as the 'silent' editor of Athol Fugard's Notebooks. Over a forty-year period, however, Benson had been active as a spokesperson and writer on South African humanitarian and racial issues. With the recent release of her writing in South Africa and with the appearance in our bookshops of two of her books with enormous current appeal (her biography of Mandela and her revised history of the ANC), Mary Benson has suddenly been returned to our social and literary consciousness as a tireless campaigner for a better South Africa and as the author of numerous books and plays. As her autobiography, A Far Cry (1989), reminds us, her life - a kind of conversion from white middle-class complacency to committed spokesperson and lobbyist - has been shaped decisively by her involvement in public events and issues.

Benson was born in Pretoria in 1919 into a typically white, middle-class family. She left South Africa as a teenager and, attracted by the glamour of Hollywood, she identified fully with the colonial conception that 'true' civilisation was to be found in Europe and America. She spent the war years in the South African Women's Army, serving in North Africa and the Mediterranean. It was while she was working as a secretary to the film director David Lean, in London, that she read Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country which, she writes, "crashed open the mould in which my white consciousness had been formed"(1989:47). It is from this change of consciousness that she charts her growing recognition of her responsibility as a South African. While working with Rev. Michael Scott, a dedicated champion of the oppressed, she lobbied against apartheid in Britain and at the United Nations. In 1957 she worked as secretary to the Treason Trial Defence Fund and later assisted Chief Albert Luthuli in clerical duties when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She has

addressed the UN Special Committee on Apartheid, where she called for economic sanctions as the only "civilised form of action"(1989:246) that could hope to end apartheid. Back in South Africa in 1965, she reported for the London Observer on the political trials in the Eastern Cape. The following year she was banned and placed under house arrest and, unable to publish her writings or be quoted in this country, she soon left South Africa to live in exile in London.

Her writing career had begun before her exile. In 1960 she published her biography of Tshekedi Khama. This was followed, in 1963, by a short book on Albert Luthuli. Her history of the ANC, The African Patriots (1966), was updated and reissued as South Africa : the Struggle for a Birthright (1985) and her biography Nelson Mandela (1986) has been updated to include details of his release from prison in 1990. Her radio plays for the BBC include Nelson Mandela and The Rivonia Trial and Robben Island - A Place of Martyrs . Her numerous newspaper articles include accounts of political trials in the Eastern Cape in the 1960s, and stories about the suffering incurred by black people as a result of the Pass Laws and influx control. She edited The Sun Will Rise - Statements from the Dock (testimonies of prisoners in political trials) and Athol Fugard's Notebooks (1983), and she has also helped to re-edit and adapt tapes of Winnie Mandela's life (published in 1984 as the book Part of My Soul).

This study will look at the problem of defining Benson as a person and a writer. As a reading of her oeuvre indicates, the two categories are impossible to separate. Despite her use of the traditional generic classifications autobiography, biography, history and novel, it is soon apparent that we are in the company of a large autobiographical enterprise, as Benson shapes her own life while focusing on other lives that are important to her sense of what it means to be a South African. In fact, A Far Cry is sub-titled "The Making of a South African". Yet, hers is an

autobiographical project that is problematic. Most obviously, she does not comply with 'Western' views of the autobiography as a record of intense introspection and reflection on the self. Rather she develops an identity through her interaction with other people and through her attachment to public actions. She emerges not so much as the private individual, but as the voice of witness and testimony, and it is difficult in her work to give predominance to the self over and against the necessary claims of others. Perhaps Roy Pascal's definition of autobiography has the flexibility we need in looking at A Far Cry :

There is no autobiography that is not in some respect a memoir, and no memoir that is without autobiographical information; both are based on personal experience, chronological, and reflective. But there is a general difference in the direction of the author's attention. In the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others. (1960:5)

As Pascal goes on to say:

...those autobiographers who have taken their task seriously have recognised that for their purpose they have to be reticent about whole aspects of their life in the interests of their main task. We do not assume that what they tell us is all there is to be told, but that it is all that is significant and relevant. (1960:113)

The difficulty of responding to Benson, however, involves more than matters of selection and design in the writing of one's own life. Benson stands as a public figure in a culture notoriously patriarchal, and the question arises as to what problems of self are attendant on Benson's gender. A glance at her books will show that it is usually powerful, charismatic men who have fascinated Benson and through whose



lives she tends to define her own. Is this female self-effacement? And even if it is, does it negate Benson's sense of self or add to her own authenticity? Linked to this configuration of the 'person' and the 'society' is the question I raised earlier about Benson's use of literary forms to express her ideas and attitudes. To confine Benson, the person, to traditional self-expressive passages while seeing accounts of any other people as 'biographies' may be missing the complex interaction of the 'personal' and the 'public' in someone like Benson. When we read her biography of Mandela, for example, are we witnessing Benson's diminishing of her own personality before the hero-figure of Mandela, or is Benson's way of depicting Mandela a kind of justification of her own values? In other words, is she simply influenced by powerful men or does she to some extent create these men according to her own image of selfhood and commitment? And when she writes a novel, is the whole truth that, as she said in a recent interview, she chose the novel form in the 1960s because it was more likely to escape the eyes of Security Police and censors ("I thought it difficult to do justice to or, rather, to reveal the truth about certain events during that dangerous period - the mid-sixties - in documentary form"(Chapman,1990:8))? Or can we recognise here also a more personal, psychological need in that the protagonist, Anne Dawson, gives voice, under the guise of fictional convention, to several of Benson's own private feelings which do not emerge in her more obviously autobiographical texts?

In examining first the autobiography, A Far Cry, then the biography, Nelson Mandela, and lastly the novel, At the Still Point, I hope to suggest a way of reading Benson's literary achievement. In doing so, I shall be investigating what I see as the central interest in Benson: her problem - or is it our problem? - of defining her 'self'.

## A Far Cry

Central to A Far Cry is Benson's investigation of what it means to be South African. The book explores what is involved in accepting such a responsibility. Out of this Benson both explicitly and implicitly defines a role for herself. As I have suggested, however, the question of where Benson the individual ends and Benson the representative social figure begins, is difficult to answer. Perhaps the question A Far Cry raises is whether attempts to separate 'personal' and 'public' selves are legitimate.

A turning point is Benson's encounter with Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country. With the book provoking a drastic re-evaluation of her beliefs, Benson's resulting crisis of conscience has all the intensity of a 'conversion'. Suddenly her job as David Lean's secretary seems empty and pointless and, desperately searching for a 'purpose' in life, she attends a screening of a documentary film showing slum conditions in black South African locations. She writes: "The revelations which in Paton's book had opened heart and mind were now there before my eyes and I tried to catch up on long years of ignorance by reading all the relevant books and articles I could find" (1989:59). Our response to A Far Cry, therefore, must address the nature of this conversion, and it is worth bearing in mind Pascal's point that autobiographers who choose to focus on a specific 'outlook' or 'calling' necessarily limit their range of experience in order to foreground this element: "Few autobiographers do not include the statement of an attitude; but in these cases it constitutes the main substance of their activity, and determines what in their experience they value and record"(1960:96). Benson's approach is to define her transformation in the course of exploring the influences and experiences that assisted her development as a person. She allows her self-definition to become increasingly less reliant on personal introspection and more dependent on her engagement with the public world. In outlining how she came to know and love her country (by which she finds her

'purpose' in life), she relies heavily on her interaction with well-known public figures. It is from the example of their lives that she derives a better understanding of her country, and it is through these 'lives' that she begins to perceive a unique role for herself.

The most consistent focus on her personal life is to be found in the first section of her autobiography, which covers her childhood and adolescence in Pretoria; and the frivolity and self-absorption that characterize her descriptions here are oddly incongruous when judged against the bulk of the narrative. Her account of her war experiences, for example, illustrates the light-hearted romanticism of her youth:

Each morning we drilled to an audience of grinning cavalry officers. You must not think. If you thought, your arms went *with* your legs. 'No, Benson. NO! *Not* like a chimpanzee!' Deck sports filled the afternoons. At night we danced and flirted - it was sheer delight to be kissed under a starry sky while the blacked-out ship glided through the dark sea where enemy submarines lurked, perhaps. (1989:23)

It may appear that these early chapters are over-dramatized. This could be a valid claim, but, given the later change in tone, it is possible that in the early chapters Benson the mature author is deliberately re-creating the 'false consciousness' of her youth in an attempt to lend emphasis by contrast to her subsequent development. As a prelude to what is essentially a very different undertaking, the memories of Country Club dances, picnics, tennis parties and other trappings of what is clearly designated as white privilege, slowly give way to reports of her attendance at political meetings and her acquaintance with a growing circle of black friends. Early in her story Benson herself points to the discrepancies between her youthful escapades and what was to become her centre of attention: " We were surrounded by the symbols of a system that was to become infamous, a system that I was to spend much of my life opposing

and of which I was at that time totally oblivious"(1989:13). As the reading of Paton's book brings the recognition that "This complex and marvellous country was *my* country"(1989:47), the narrative moves from the superficial, self-centred world of the first section to the social responsibility which characterizes the ensuing chapters.

Benson's awakening interest in her home country and in the injustices of apartheid is suggested by the appellation, "Learning", which designates the sections of her book devoted to her close friendships with several celebrated, charismatic men. The chapter headings bear the different personalities' names and it seems to be their voices, rather than her own, that are given prominence. In appearing reluctant to make claims for herself, Benson creates what begin to suggest role models - derived, as I have said, almost exclusively from men - within an amorphous liberal humanism. She foregrounds the suffering and exemplary endeavours of these individual figures against repressive social forces, and connects their lives with the demands of political responsibility. As we continue through the book, we realise that the qualities gleaned from the 'case histories' of Paton, Scott, Khama and others are the qualities Benson herself begins to present as the *raison d'être* of her own behaviour. Who, then, comes first: the men figures or Benson *herself*? In a recent interview, Benson denied creating heroes and preferred to speak of these men as "influences in discovering what it meant to be South African"(1990:9). What is evident to the reader - even if the 'autobiographer' herself will not admit to it - is that Benson's South African 'community' comprises a selection of voices that helps her define her own identity. It is an observation which Dorothy Driver has found pertinent to several other 'women autobiographers' :

'Self' is constructed in dialectic with others or another: one cannot see oneself in the absence of projections from the world around one. What the self is awaits its determination by or from those outside the

self, those who say 'me' to me, and who constitute the self for which I strive. (Driver, 1990:232)

The most intense of her several friendships involved the English cleric Michael Scott. It was also, however, the most problematic. She was attracted to him initially by reports of his fearless battle on behalf of the dispossessed Herero tribe of South West Africa (now Namibia) and, more generally, by his fierce opposition to apartheid. (Some years before Drum magazine highlighted the farm-labour scandal in Bethal, Scott had compiled a damning dossier of labour practices on white-owned farms in the Eastern Transvaal.) The seven years Benson spends with Scott are characterized by her greater understanding of, and contact with, black South Africans, and her developing confidence in her own role as a lobbyist and spokesperson against apartheid. She writes of Scott as being "so predictably part of my destiny" (1989:58), indicating that she perceived him as having had a vital and significant effect on the course of her life: "After those agonizing years of uncertainty, I rapturously informed Alan [Paton] that I had found my purpose in life....I solemnly confided that I was committed to the work and believed that even without Michael, I would still go on"(1989:61,66). Despite this, her evolving commitment to the oppressed did not proceed independently of her frustration in her devotion to Scott. At the level of intimate relations, she found herself in love with a celibate: "there could be nothing personal in his life"(1989:89). Nevertheless, her growing assurance that their mutual cause was just and the tangible nature of her own contribution to this struggle make her encounter with Scott a crucial stage in her discovery of her own convictions. It was Scott's untiring championing of the oppressed that inspired and encouraged her to take up their cause. It was through Scott that she was introduced to the complexities of lobbying at the UN and before the American Congress. It was his name that opened doors for her back in South Africa as she visited Sophiatown for

the first time, and made contacts with representatives of the ANC. Through Scott, she met Tshekedi Khama, who was to become the subject of her first published biography.

Yet, there is a greater significance in her idolization of Scott than merely a catalogue of opportunities. As Benson herself suggests by her remark that Scott was 'predictably part of [her] destiny', Scott embodied many of the qualities she herself was to pursue and revere all her adult life. Committed to the oppressed, it was Scott's consciousness of human suffering rather than any programme of ideology that moved him to act, and he had little regard for laws he considered to be unjust. This accurately charts Benson's own approach. While A Far Cry may appear to offer a mini-biography of Scott, his story actually<sup>8</sup> reveals a great deal about Benson's own values and suggests the source of her developing commitment: "all I learned from him," she says, "enriched and influenced the rest of my life" (1989:92). Obviously our interpretation of her response to Scott helps us, in turn, to understand Benson. In other words, the 'biographies' in A Far Cry are simultaneously part of the author's 'autobiography'. As Scott himself is quoted as saying to Benson:

'Your strongest asset is your freedom and lack of material roots. And your possibilities are great provided you do things not for the Africans, nor for me, but because you were born in South Africa, of your parents, at a particular time. As a result you have a certain responsibility.' (1989:74)

It is a responsibility that Benson gladly shoulders, and one cannot, therefore, say in any simple terms that, in focusing so long on other people, Benson defines herself at 'second-hand'. In responding to A Far Cry, we also necessarily have to modify some of our expectations of the autobiography as the absorbing narrative of a personal life.

Scott is but one example of the numerous individual lives Benson records in the course of this book, and, as she emphasizes that she is "inspired ... by the human spirit" (1989:178) rather than by ideologies, it is perhaps appropriate that so much of her story should involve her interactions with others. She was wary of communists, for instance, until she met Ruth First and Joe Slovo: "their friendliness did not dispel my unease at being with Communists, unease that was dispelled as I came to know them"(1989:112). Once again the public world illuminates her personal views. This is the case, too, when she writes about her friend, Bram Fischer, another communist : "...as we drove on that day, for me there was also an intensely personal revelation. Just as reading Cry, the Beloved Country had shattered my prejudice against blacks, so now Bram had blown away the cobwebs of my childhood perception of Afrikaners as alien"(1989:171). She has a similar reaction to Athol Fugard, who was "everything [she] had been brought up to be snobbish about"(1989:188). Although she regards Fugard principally as a celebrated playwright with a unique perception of South African life, there is a deeply personal aspect to their friendship: a special relationship that brings her physically closer to the African soil, as they "came to regard each other as Sissy and Boetie"(1989:190). Their friendship precipitates an intense moment of reflection in A Far Cry that hints at much that is left unexpressed in overtly personal terms. Benson had written Fugard a letter describing her feelings of inadequacy in the face of the worsening political situation in South Africa and her sense of isolation from friends who did not share her social commitments. He wrote back comparing her to an old destitute woman they had seen walking alongside a road in the Eastern Cape [his inspiration for Lena?] : " 'Like her you are crying. But walk, Mary. Put your life on your head and walk. To do so is not to die. It is to live with the reality of your circumstances. The walk is long, bitter, barren and full of pain, but it is the only way to Live'"(1989:8). The words may be Fugard's; the fears are obviously Benson's own. It is not that she is giving the playwright words he did

not utter; nonetheless, we are alerted again to Benson's selection of other voices as reinforcing her own 'autobiographical' emotions, attitudes and ideas.

Just as her small "biographies" have a subjective compulsion, so does her record of events. She is particularly compelling when she writes about her research for her history of the ANC, and these experiences - we note the accumulation of personal pronouns - obviously heightened her own awareness of her societal role:

In my research into the ANC's history, I came to know my country as never before....And I came to know our history, so rich and complex compared with the arid distortions learnt in school. This history flowed partly from a recollection of individual lives, from people's opinions of each other and, of course, from what it meant to be black....the past grew in my imagination. (1989:135)

As she relives this period, it becomes clear that public activity has great meaning for her: "It was during the journey back to Port Elizabeth that I suddenly realized I felt wholly South African, involved in the fate of my country, belonging" (1989:140). Avoiding the autobiography of private absorption, she uses court records and press headlines of the time which, while they add drama and authenticity to her accounts, serve to distance her own self from the larger narrative, so that the hints of an individual story are continually being subsumed beneath historically verifiable data: "Headlines in the Press reflected the growing tension: POLICE CONFIDENT ALL IS UNDER CONTROL; WHITES FORM VIGILANTE GROUPS; RAND RUSH FOR ARMS..." (1989:128). For Benson, the value of her life lies in its particular historical moment: it is her capacity to record the events and recall the destinies of other people that justifies her story, and it is through her role as witness that we begin to understand her comprehensive 'self'.



This notwithstanding, Benson herself was not immediately convinced of the value of her role as witness and spokesperson. Anthony Sampson, the ex-editor of Drum, had to persuade her to write a history of the ANC (The African Patriots), not because she was unwilling to undertake the task, but because she felt unqualified and, as a white person, inappropriately designated as an 'official' voice in black protest politics: "I had no Academic qualifications and anyway thought an African writer would be more appropriate" (1989:127). Later, when she and two other journalists are taken to meet Nelson Mandela, who had gone underground after the banning of the ANC, she writes that she was "content to let the 'pros' question him" (1989:129). This apparent lack of confidence extends to areas where her public activity is a consequence of her own efforts. Her tour of the United States, for instance, is a direct result of the publication of The African Patriots. In the course of her description of the American tour, however, she makes little reference to her reception as a writer. Predictably, she foregrounds her position as a representative of the oppressed people back home; she addresses meetings and rallies, and becomes the first South African to testify before the UN Special Committee on Apartheid. "Tense at the responsibility" (1989:147), she nevertheless uses the opportunity to call for economic sanctions against South Africa. (The text of her speech is included as an appendix to A Far Cry, indicating the importance she places on her function as spokesperson).

Sanctions, however, are a complex and controversial issue and one is immediately reminded of Paton's advice to her, quoted earlier in her story:

'If you want to fight against race prejudice, fear, discrimination in South Africa, you can do it *most powerfully* and *more comfortably* outside the country...Understand, I'm not sneering. There's a fight to be fought *outside* South Africa, but it's a much easier one than the one here'.(1989:85)

In calling for sanctions and taking the route of exile, Benson needs to feel that her status as an enlightened South African cannot be called into question; her love for her country must be seen to touch deep roots. In the closing chapters of A Far Cry, for example, she quotes extensively from the journal of her 1820 Settler great-grandfather Thomas Stubbs, possibly signalling her need to affirm her South African origin and to claim the heritage that was being denied to her by banning orders and house arrest: "...this enthralling journal revealed an intimate, ancestral connection. Michael Scott's remark about my having a certain responsibility because I was born in South Africa, of my parents, acquired greater depth"(1989:219). Yet the 'settler heritage' is both enlightened and conservative, and despite being sympathetic to the hardships endured by her forbears, Benson is not unaware of the problems of 'belonging' in the context of colonialism: "Like most settlers, he was bigoted and he regarded their occupation of the land as a natural right to Englishmen bringing civilization to a savage continent"(1989:222). Her claim to a birthright is, simultaneously, a vindication of her democratic right to oppose what, in the humanitarian tradition, is not just. Not all experience, however, can be explained by principles of conduct, and Benson's love (like Paton's) also involves an emotional connection to the 'beloved country': "I wished that I could return to search out the far-off patch of scrubland where he and the family struggled to survive. I longed to 'go home'"(1989:223). This aspect of her attachment is poignantly expressed when, during her brief return to South Africa in 1968, she recalls a moment that captures both the personal Benson and her public self:

It's here I belong, I thought. The passion that had caused spiritual amputation in exile - even while I agonized over my father's slow dying, I felt alive, exhilarated at being back among people I loved, in the country where the dust and brittle air had the power to move me.

Having looked at certain interchanges between Benson's 'public' and 'private' selves, it is interesting to consider the extent to which her responses are shaped by her gender. Possibly those aspects of her personal relationships that remain largely unexpressed can suggest something about conventional notions of the 'feminine', the 'personal', the 'emotional', while she places emphasis on 'masculine' public activities. Certainly these are the distinctions Benson herself recognises in referring to a love affair during her stay in the United States:

Our times together gave new meaning to that life. The drive towards political action, my lecturing and lobbying, seemed to represent the masculine element in my nature, pleasing Dad, delivering the goods. I felt happier when reflective, strolling in Central Park, pausing to watch some insect or to gaze at leaves against sunlight and, now, this contentment flowing from the heart of my being. (1989:155)

If by foregrounding her public role she herself feels she is foregrounding her 'masculine' nature, then it may be understandable that she relies so consistently for articulation on the male 'influences' in her life, even to the extent of having Fugard express what are essentially her own anxieties:

'You're making your last fling for something you *won't* get. You want it I know; you need it, but you won't get it....What is "it"? Put all the impossibles together and I suppose they'll add up to "it" - a new meaning for an old body...the hunger for love that's been so frustrated in your life...Children? A home? Youth?' (1989:204)

Fugard is allowed to voice many of the concerns that Benson herself might regard as 'feminine'. Interestingly, these are concerns that, except in her words of anxiety about her failed relationship with Michael Scott, remain largely unexplored in A Far Cry. Yet in accepting Benson's own delineation of gender socialization

(male/assertive/public - female/passive/private) we become attuned to voice that is more 'personal' than we might be led initially to hear.

Turning from Benson's record of political events to her reactions and reflections on these events, we realise how integral to her conception of her 'self' is her sensitivity to the people behind socio-political structures and her sympathy for individual hardship and suffering. In pointing to her lack of confidence and self-effacement in public life, I see something of her difficulties as a woman in a political world traditionally regarded as a male domain. This suggests that her liberal 'representativeness' as a concerned South African is given accents and tones not only by her own individual personality, but by her position as a woman. Her own explanation of her 'masculine' side is too simple, for in contextualising Benson, we find a strong community of outspoken women: Ruth First, Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Suzman. Why do they not feature in any formative sense - as men do - in the story of her life? Is it merely a feature of Benson's generation that the male figure should have greater significance in the public world? Or, is yet another complicating factor involved: the pervading influence on Benson's life of her father: an influence giving rise to what she herself (in her women's psychology of socialisation) identifies as Jung's Brunnhilde theory?

... [Brunnhilde] was spellbound by her father's love; no mortal man could be worthy of her; she was condemned to the need for idols or heroes. (1989:92)

Shifting from considerations of the life to those of literature, we could also see the authority of the autobiographical form demanding that Benson give priority to the public voice. As we shall see in the third section, she seems to feel more able to explore personal concerns in the form of fiction.

Since so much of A Far Cry is devoted to Benson defining her South African identity, it is not surprising that much of her other writing is similarly concerned with the person in the public sphere, and James Olney's remarks have pertinence to Benson's career as a writer:

When the autobiographer thinks of himself or herself as a writer and would put down "writer" ...when asked for a profession, the tendency is to produce autobiography in various guises and disguises in every work and then - this being the other side of the coin - to seek a unique form in a work properly called "an autobiography" that may reflect and express the life and vision of this individual writer alone.  
(1980:237)

We shall see that A Far Cry is an autobiographical project inextricably connected to Benson's other forms of writing, and it is therefore difficult to regard it in isolation as the ultimate expression of 'self', or, in Olney's terms, as reflecting on its own the 'life and vision' of Benson. In turning to her popular biography, Nelson Mandela, we could ask how much this book is informed by Benson's own values and 'sense of self', and how much she allows Mandela to emerge as an autonomous 'biographical' being.

## Nelson Mandela

One way of reviewing Benson's literary achievement would be to recognise the variety of forms in which she has chosen to work: autobiography, biography, novel, history, the play, the documentary. My argument, however, is that in the variety of forms is a central 'autobiographical' question concerning Benson's sense of her identity in relation to South African social values. What we concluded about A Far Cry was that its form - in which the 'auto' of personal signature seemed at times to yield to biographies of other figures - was not a failure of autobiographical narrative, but an apt kind of structure for the problem of the self in its public fulfilment. Indeed, most of Benson's writing does not point obviously to the genre autobiography but has suggested 'history' (The African Patriots) and, most often, biography: Albert Luthuli, Tshekedi Khama and Nelson Mandela. What I want to suggest in this section is that her biographies are also in a sense autobiographical activities, in that Benson's depictions of public figures - as we saw in A Far Cry - tend to exemplify attitudes and ideals that she herself values. As Alan Shelston says:

The biographer is always likely to turn to a subject with whom he has instinctive sympathy, and in doing so, to reveal as much of himself as he does of his subject. (1977:47)

This would usually be unremarkable. In Benson's case, however, the interest is crucial to our understanding of a writer who does not really separate public and personal responses. Looking at Benson's Nelson Mandela, I want to comment not only on its achievement as a political biography, but on its integral place in any study of Benson's own personality. It could be said that in selecting and ordering the facts of Mandela's life, Benson is simultaneously involved in a project of self-validation. In this regard, Ira Bruce Nadel makes an interesting observation:

...the principle interest in biography, the reason for its popularity with authors as well as readers, remains its ability to provide meaning for an individual's life, transmitting personality and character through prose. It furthermore nourishes the author's sense of identity and vitality through the act of recreating the subject's life. (1984:155)

Given that our bookshops are presently stocked with books on Mandela and the ANC, we might ask: what kind of biography does Benson offer us on this most famous political prisoner and leader?

Although she has updated the book to include details of Mandela's release early in 1990, Benson recently stated: "I would not attempt to write such books now; now that most of the 'characters' are free to speak and there are generations of new writers to do so" (1990:7). As Fatima Meer says, Mandela can now "give us an autobiography" (1989:xvi), and I suggest that, since Mandela's release, the interest in Benson's book can be found not only in its subject Mandela, but in what it contributes to Benson's own achievement as a writer who only now has begun to come to the attention of South African readers. In the mid-1980s, however, the biography of the imprisoned Mandela was written with a deliberate purpose in Benson's mind. Much of her writing has helped to recover silenced voices, and the Mandela biography forms part of this exercise in reconstruction. When the book appeared in 1986, Mandela had been in prison - mostly on Robben Island - for over twenty-four years. Lines of communication with his family and friends were severely restricted, and any text which published his words or image was immediately banned inside South Africa. Although Mandela was an international name, not a great deal of his detailed life was part of the public consciousness, and the context of the mid-1980s would have seemed conducive to a biographical study. Pressure against South Africa was increasingly finding a focus in the 'Release Mandela' campaign while government propaganda, in the midst of the state of emergency, continued to portray Mandela and the Rivonia

Trialists to local audiences as communists, terrorists and traitors. In helping to recover Mandela's 'lost voice', Benson contributes to rehabilitating his public image. As she says : "I hoped to enlighten readers in the West about the man then portrayed by the South African government as a terrorist and communist"(1990:6). Her project, accordingly, is to show Mandela as a reasonable, democratic, peace-loving man, whose continued imprisonment was a violation of basic human rights. Despite the limited source material available to her, she attempts to account for his immense popularity and the growing Mandela myth, as she states clearly in the first chapter:

How is it that a man imprisoned for more than twenty-three years - who has not been allowed to be quoted by the South African media - has become the embodiment of the struggle for liberation in that country and the vital symbol of a new society? (1986:13)

Since there was little doubt that the book would be banned in South Africa, Benson must have regarded her readership primarily as a Western one, in Britain and the United States. Nonetheless, the book has characteristics of a 'popular history' and an implied readership could be the oppressed 'people' in South Africa: it is written in a simple, accessible, lively style and includes a number of photographs (the latter has, admittedly, become standard procedure in many contemporary biographies); analysis is kept to a minimum, and Benson prefers instead to allow Mandela to inspire by example. While this acts to counter the anti-Mandela propaganda of the South African state, it also allows Mandela to emerge, as it were, as a person in his own right. As I am suggesting, Benson was possibly already, unconsciously or in hope, aiming her book at a latent audience in this country. Certainly, the knowledge that some South Africans had managed to get copies of her banned The African Patriots made her feel she had achieved something (Chapman,1990:3).



In seeking to place Mandela in his historical context, to offer an explanation for his actions and to provide justification for the international interest in his case, Benson was hampered, of course, by her subject's incarceration in a maximum security prison. Unable to communicate with him directly, she had to rely on research conducted twenty years earlier when Mandela was active in underground political activity. To a limited extent, she was able to interview his family and his comrades in the ANC but, unfortunately, information provided by ex-Robben Island prisoners sometimes proved to be inaccurate (Chapman, 1990:6). These difficulties were compounded by the fact that Benson, as a banned person, was herself unable to return to South Africa to catch the temper of the 1980s in which she hoped to add to the campaign to release Mandela. As it was, Mandela's occasional speeches and writings, especially his early addresses from the dock at the time of Rivonia, had to be used to dramatic effect. (These had been collected in the International Defence and Aid Fund publication, The Struggle is My Life.)

The first chapter heading in Nelson Mandela guides us to Benson's basic proposition: "A reasonable man, not a violent man" (1986:13). She then proceeds to select and arrange the facts to substantiate her assessment while plotting a narrative for her story. As Nadel points out, a good biography relies on an imaginative dimension brought to bear on the data:

In transforming the unselective moments of a life into a pattern, the biographer establishes both an explanation and a theme for his subject. Fact becomes metonymic....Every biography manifests its inherently literary resources through its style, tone and point of view and seemingly contradicts the nature of its pure historiography. This opposition between the requirement of presenting facts in a literary fashion versus their basic unimaginative character occurs through the process of emplotment....For a fact to exist in a biography it needs an

imaginative as well as referential dimension which the process of writing provides. (1984:10)

In validating Mandela the person and leader, and thereby discrediting the demonized image favoured by the South African authorities, Benson reveals her skills as a writer employing a number of literary strategies designed to give flesh-and-blood to her exemplary portrait. By emphasising his humanity, she dispels threatening myths. She begins by using a common fictive convention in South African literature that immediately locates Mandela's story within the tradition of "Jim-comes-to-Jo'burg", the ordinary black person's journey from rural childhood to urban industrial adulthood:

At the age of twenty-two, he set off for Johannesburg....In 1941 Mandela, a striking, athletic young man with a natural air of authority, was one among many thousands flocking to Johannesburg....He found a room in Alexandra ...There an acquaintance suggested he should meet 'a certain Walter Sisulu', who could be relied on to give useful advice. (1986:21,22,23)

In a passage that echoes Cry, the Beloved Country, Mandela, the young, country cousin, is assisted by a mature, city-wise Sisulu (Msimangu in Paton's novel). In this archetypal way, Benson roots Mandela in a community and begins to establish his story as representative.

Mandela's representativeness is important, as it helps to justify his role as a public, political person. Benson must validate the man in relation to his cause, and (in much the same manner as her own story in A Far Cry unfolded alongside her public role) so Mandela's own life is seen as indivisible from his socio-political activities and, indeed, from the history of his time. As Benson wants us to recognise, Mandela

himself will not separate his 'self' into bourgeois 'private' and 'public' selves; and he is quoted as saying at his trial in 1962: "I hope to be able to indicate ... that this case is a trial of the aspirations of the African people, and because of that I thought it proper to conduct my own defence"(1986:120). Benson is acutely aware of the implications of placing Mandela in a political framework, and she shows herself to be sensitive to the complexity of his position. In remarking on Mandela's having distanced himself from the tribal system of chieftainship, she dispels any hints of arrogance on his part. Rather, he had reacted against the fact that traditional chiefs had been co-opted by the state in its determination to enforce its 'homelands' policy. She goes on to describe Mandela's rejection of a marriage arranged for him as a descendant of a royal Xhosa household:

His rejection of the designated marriage symbolized a deeper rejection, for by this time he had realized he was being prepared for chieftainship and he had made up his mind never to rule over an oppressed people. (1986:21)

Having made this point, Benson nevertheless takes what could be valuable from Mandela's royal lineage, emphasising that he had "been groomed from childhood for respectability, status and sheltered living" (1986:23). It is an argument that often appears to be directed at a Western liberal audience: the university he attended had "a proud record of educating potential leaders" and his friend, Oliver Tambo, had attended "the African Eton" (1986:20). Mandela's representativeness is that of the exceptional leader. While he retains the modern - and even common - touch, he emerges from ancient traditions of heroes.

Benson's use of anecdote is particularly effective in helping her create a multi-dimensional picture of her subject. Her stories tend to confirm Mandela as a leader who is also a 'man of the people'. An incident is reported, for example, of Mandela hiding in a friend's flat while evading police:

A problem arose: how to explain to the Zulu cleaner employed by the landlords, the presence of a black man staying as a guest in this apartment block....They agreed that Kodesh should tell the cleaner that 'David' was a student preparing to go overseas....Kodesh set off for work and when he returned at lunch time, found Mandela and the Zulu chatting and laughing. It was not the first time that he had noted Mandela's way of getting on easily with servants....(1986:107)

A second incident displays Mandela's sense of humour, a trait Benson emphasises at every opportunity. This occurred during the Rivonia trial, when the State continually made it difficult for the defendants to consult with their lawyers:

...difficulties magnified...by the inconvenience of the new interview room....defendants were now separated from lawyers by a partition in the form of a high counter, topped by iron bars....The lawyers were shown to their side of the partition...[while] on the opposite side Mandela and four men perched on stools....Smiling politely, Mandela asked, 'What will it be today, gentlemen, chocolate or vanilla?'(1986:143)

By giving details of, and insights into, Mandela's everyday behaviour, Benson creates him as a warm, personable and amusing man and thereby persuades the reader to sympathise and side with the ANC leader.

With the anecdotes serving as lively interludes, Benson makes skilful use of Mandela's speeches and writings. The biography not only enlightens readers about his life, but allows Mandela to tell much of his story in his own words. In an attempt to make the most of these moments, Benson often recreates the conditions of the speeches, transforming the 'fact' into 'theatre'. In one effective instance, she quotes

what is possibly still Mandela's most famous speech, his statement from the dock as Accused No.1 in the Rivonia Treason Trial:

Mandela ceased reading. The court was very quiet. He looked up at the Judge and when he spoke again, his voice was very low:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people....I have cherished the idea of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

He sat down. From the galleries came a deep sigh. Then, again, silence....(1986:159)

Such scenes dramatize the narrative and lend added specificity and substance to Mandela's words. It is interesting to note that according to Benson's autobiography, she was in London at the time of the Rivonia Trial and could not therefore have witnessed Mandela in court. She would have gained reports from people who were present; but several scenes suggest what Shelston calls 'impressionistic' biography: not necessarily true in fact but true in essence. In any case, the evocations of time, place, and purpose seem apt.

The court records and Mandela's few published speeches were the only primary material Benson had available for the biography, and they provide the 'evidence' of Mandela's character and philosophy. In repressive societies especially official documents can usefully be regarded as necessary forms of 'literature', and Benson makes full use of court proceedings which, ironically, would have been exempt from bannings and censorship. Often quoting out of chronology, she exploits 'poetic licence' in order to reinforce her points. When describing how the law partnership, Mandela & Tambo, helped in 1952 to politicise these two young lawyers, for example, she again quotes Mandela's trial speech in retrospect:

'I would say...that the whole life of any thinking African in this country drives him continuously to a conflict between his conscience on the one hand and the law on the other...a law which, in our view, is immoral, unjust, and intolerable'. (1986:56)

But the man must both stand out from and shade into the larger history, and Benson's use of contemporary documents, pamphlets and news headlines is particularly comprehensive in her attempt to set the scene and re-create almost thirty years of anti-apartheid protest. Describing the preparations for the Congress of the People in 1955, she quotes from the nationwide circulars that caught the rhetoric of the occasion:

WE CALL ON THE FARMERS OF THE RESERVES AND TRUST LANDS!

Let us speak of the wide lands and the narrow strips on which we toil.

Let us speak of the brothers without land and the children without schooling.

Let us speak of taxes and of cattle and of famine.

LET US SPEAK OF FREEDOM!(1986:65)

Against these 'slogan-poems', she describes the banners, and the black, green and gold clothing of the participants and notes with wry amusement that when confiscating the documents and placards the Special Branch also seized two notices from the food stall, "SOUP WITH MEAT and SOUP WITHOUT MEAT"(1986:66). Introducing a note of dark humour she goes on to tell us that the two notices appeared as evidence in the 1956 Treason Trial. These small details add authority to the narrative and, by extension, help to convince us of Benson's qualifications, as witness, to write the story of Mandela, the person and the politician.

A problem remains: how does one retain a 'biographical' centrality for Mandela when he is not a direct participant in the events of the 1960's, 70's and 80's and when,

owing to his incarceration, one has increasingly limited access to his thoughts and feelings? Benson relies in part on selections of his earlier speeches to keep his 'presence' alive as a first-person voice. Concentrating on political developments during these years, she documents the growing tensions and discontent in the country, and, where possible, quotes Mandela's views in relation to current events:

'The centre and cornerstone of the struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa lies inside South Africa itself,' Mandela had said in 1962. During 1977 the armed struggle began in earnest as guerrillas and saboteurs filtered back across the borders. (1986:197)

In this way, Mandela's authority seems to continue to shape the narrative.

Another technique Benson employs is to introduce and pursue the story of Winnie Mandela. This allows Benson to maintain the element of human interest in the Mandela story, as Winnie assumes the combined role of courageous wife, fearless activist and, symbolically, mother of the nation. As in *A Far Cry*, Benson's view of gender as exemplifying certain 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits has Winnie's triumph take 'approved' women's forms. When banished to Brandfort, she established a self-help clinic, and challenged petty apartheid in the dress section of Foschini's. Certainly, this is not 'feminism'; yet Winnie's suffering and courage do not only provide an analogy for the suffering and courage of her husband. Instead, her presence in the book offers readers intense and moving sequences from Winnie's own struggle. The larger narrative, however, is about people-in-history, and the book moves towards Benson's report of the 'Release Mandela' campaign. As she outlines the extensive civil unrest of the early eighties, it becomes clear to the reader that she sees Mandela's release as a real solution to the crisis:

'Release Mandela, talk to him', Botha was urged by critics at home and abroad: only thus might the cycle of violence be halted and diffused, the economy revived. (1986:242)

This theme is so dominant that, in ending the 1986 edition of the biography, Benson quotes Winnie as saying confidently, "When Nelson is released..." (1986:254), and the final lines cite a slogan from a Soweto wall: "MANDELA IS WITH US STILL"(1986:86). Despite his imprisonment, Mandela's spirit and example inspire the shape of South Africa's 'new, democratic' age.

As I have indicated, Benson's intention is to present Mandela as a 'reasonable' man and the narrative insists on this purpose. By emphasising the ANC leader's attachment to his community, his passion for education, his humour, his level-headedness, and by explaining his actions in a coherent historical process (one which moves black South Africans towards freedom), Benson seeks to create an impression of Mandela as the exemplum of a non-racial, democratic future. Ideologically, her narrative avoids programmes in favour of experiential response, and she avoids remarking on internal divisions in the opposition to apartheid. The emphases of both 'liberal' and 'radical' historiography are evident in her narrative, for example, so that history is sometimes seen as the direct consequence of human actions (individuals 'make' history; history is a collection of biographies); at other times, we see individuals as part of larger historical processes. Similarly, Benson situates Mandela at times firmly within the liberation struggle, which could serve to minimize the myth of 'heroic endeavour'. At other times, her portrait approaches hagiography: the wider perspective provides a backdrop for the heroic figure of Mandela. At other times again, Benson seems to draw lessons for herself about the 'responsibility of being a South African':

Whatever the outcome at a time of great hope and confusion, of deep suspicion and innumerable dangers, Mandela's statesmanship can be relied on. He has never ceased learning and growing since those days in the forties when he recognised that 'going it alone' black



nationalism reflected political naïvety...Mandela has remained a free spirit with an engaging love of life. At last the moment has come for his wisdom and strength, his courage, generosity and humour to contribute to a new society in South Africa (1990:266).

It is in 'subjective' passages like this that we realise we are reading more than a biography of Mandela. We are reading too of Benson's own fears, hopes and desires: a kind of indirect 'autobiography' where Nadel's comments have peculiar appositeness: "Objective biography is logically and artistically impossible" (1984:10). As in A Far Cry, we realise that in creating her exemplary biographies Benson is conveying attitudes and hopes that are germane to her own sense of self. The biographical interest, of course, remains. In the aftermath of the unbannings of February 2 and Mandela's release, we could say that Benson's biography is in danger of becoming obsolete. Now that Mandela, as an active politician, is participating in the cut and thrust of party politics, is it still feasible to picture him in the heroic mould? Does Benson's portrait not appear now as too idealistic, and Benson, the biographer, as a little naïve? Yet we can choose how to view Benson's idealised Mandela not only in dialectical relation to his actual behaviour in the political arena, but as a sketch which emerges as ennobling memory from our dark times.

Benson's biographies, therefore, do not represent an escape from an account of her own life. Nor do we find a writer simply substituting the challenges of literary form for challenging forms of witness. As we shall see in the next section, her comment on her biographical efforts - "I found it easier to write biography, where there's an obvious framework and limitations set by the actual life of the character, than the novel with its infinite possibilities"(1990:5) - need not be accepted merely as a statement on the respective acts of biographical and novelistic writing. In significant

ways, her novel At the Still Point affords Benson a complicated freedom for personal confession within her activities as social witness.

### At the Still Point

We have noted, so far, that in both A Far Cry and Nelson Mandela, Benson gives greater substance to the demands of a public life over and above the needs of the private 'self'; that in experiencing her own life she tends to define herself through the inspiration of others, and that our problem in responding to her writing, therefore, has been to realise that her own values and beliefs do emerge, resiliently, in her portraits of other South Africans. In her only novel to date, At the Still Point, Benson, in exploring the claims of commitment and responsibility in the life of her protagonist Anne Dawson, reminds us, again, that any simple distinctions between 'private' and 'public' selves do not exist in her idea of what it is to be a person and a South African.

Although it was published in 1969 long before A Far Cry, At the Still Point has only recently become freely available in South Africa (it was unbanned in 1990), and we can read the novel in the light of the later autobiographical A Far Cry. This experience of reading backwards, as it were, through Benson's writing alerts us to the substantial autobiographical content in her novel. Anne Dawson follows an experience in the South Africa of the 1960s very similar to that of Benson whose reports, at the time, of political trials in the Eastern Cape led directly to her being placed under house arrest and banned. When asked why she chose the form of the novel Benson replied that, in the repression of the mid-1960s, the indirect methods of fiction had more of a chance of escaping the eyes of the censors. By the time the book appeared, however, Benson was a 'listed' person, and the banning of all her writings had taken place. What is interesting about Benson's use of novelistic conventions is that her creation of a fictional character (however thinly veiled) seems to give her greater freedom for personal, even intimate, expression than is apparent in her later autobiography. Such a 'personal' element, though, does not prevent At the Still Point

from prefiguring Benson's exploration and articulation of 'self' as a vindication of public action and witness.

The novel focuses on the story of Anne Dawson, and follows her progress from her role as observer of, to participant in, the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Benson establishes sharply defined choices for Anne. Still reeling from a failed American love affair, Anne arrives home to South Africa to find the opposition to apartheid "well and truly crushed"(1969:90). Her cousins and the well-heeled acquaintances of her youth are oblivious of the repressive apartheid laws that facilitate their privileges as whites, and are content to prosper while pointing out that "*our* Bantu are streets ahead of the rest of Africa" (1969:191). Anne's liberal friends, in contrast, are intent on exploring every legal loophole to keep alive the voices of protest politics. In the aftermath of Sharpeville and the banning of the ANC and PAC, Anne witnesses the injustices of apartheid at the pass-law courts, and, while she is working for the lawyer Michael Marais, she sees for the first time victims of State torture. Consequently, her rejection of her cousins' world and their Nationalist Party connections takes the form, initially, of an emotional reaction. Anne's outburst at Patrick and Sally's dinner party marks a watershed in her confrontation with her own values and beliefs:

"Shut up!" All of a sudden I was shouting, bawling at them. "The lot of you! Shut up! You make me sick! In America, here, we won't be satisfied till we've driven the blacks to murder, chaos! The torture! ... this man, he's an Indian ... I can't tell you ... the families ... You're the voters! Lot of bloody ostriches! ... Business, all you think about! It's your fault! All your fault ...your fault ..." I stormed away....(1969:84-85)

Although this stream-of-consciousness mode allows Benson to enter into Anne's inner turmoil, Anne is not allowed utter narcissism. As we have come to expect in

Benson's writing, Anne Dawson's person needs to find the justifications of exemplary behaviour in other people. Her rejection of her cousins' way of life symbolises her break with the complacency of white privilege, and her reliance on the social circle of the Lowens suggests her need to be involved in political opposition to apartheid. She requires the support and identity of this group to confirm her own reactions to the tense political situation, and it is from them that she begins to understand the dynamics that keep oppositional politics alive despite severe government control. It is Matthew Marais who attempts to explain their political identity and interdependence:

"In our country every day - whether through massive stupidity or deliberate cruelty - love and dignity and decency are destroyed. Well, once this is recognized, once responsibility to withstand such destruction is accepted, you are on the side of life ... Yes, you are harassed and restricted, but that in itself means you have power ... we have a heritage of love from those who have sacrificed themselves, who have been hanged or who are imprisoned ... They are a living presence, they enliven us so that we trust each other ... we feel tenderly toward each other ...". (1969:73)

In the same way as she was to create a public sphere to which she can contribute in A Far Cry, Benson, in her early novel, created a community of purpose for Anne, testing her character in situations requiring the witness and activity of liberal, humane and courageous forms of political response.

Anne's relationship with Matthew forces her to reassess her view of personal involvement and accustoms her to putting 'the struggle' first. Much of her development is related to this adjustment and since it is prompted by her love for Matthew, Anne's growth to personal and social consciousness is inspired by Matthew's almost heroic dedication to his cause. As he warns her when he explains his commitment: "I am nothing. We are nothing. This insistence on the personal, the

individual!"(1969:199). As Matthew sees it, their role is to "prepare, organize, train ... men and women must be equipped, ...[not] only for war but for peace"(1969:199). The movement of Anne's personal story derives from the fact that she has to reassess her own deeply 'feminine', bourgeois conditioning about the inviolability of personal fulfilment. The freedom of the fictional character's voice allows Benson to capture Anne's (and perhaps her own) mental anxieties:

Matthew ... where? What doing? Who with? Jealousy sprang. Jealous! Yes. Because your moments hours days weeks, your smile, your words and silences, your risks, are shared with others. Jealous of those others, whoever, wherever ... (1969:208)

In her agitation she rebels, by having a brief, meaningless affair, and this typical 'personal' betrayal of Matthew, seems an utter betrayal of Matthew's commitment to being human in the service of a 'public' freedom. In this way, Benson uses the situation of the 'domestic' novel to reach beyond the themes of middle-class private preoccupation to her 'historical' theme: the ravages of social amnesia and repression; the necessity of commitments in severe political times.

In realising that her place is with Matthew ("I shall visit Matthew when I can, to say nothing through the barrier. I shall write him five-hundred-word letters, when I can"(1969:242)), Anne Dawson accepts her responsibility as a South African: "my life is here ... I shall write ... "bear witness," for as long as I can"(1969:242). But we might not want to ignore some of the stereotyping of characters that Benson uses to arrive at her mature insights. Marais is depicted as the strong, coherent, purposeful character whose political allegiance and commitment are unquestionable, while Anne is consistently seen as emotional, hysterical, often incoherent as she vacillates between her recognition of stern commitment and her desire to inhabit the public domain: "Passport's in order, why not? ... Leave? Leave you, leave this place? To go,

actually to get into the airways bus and drive to the airport? Simply out of the question"(1988:231). In the age of feminism, it is easy to see Benson as endorsing views of 'madwomen in attics'. Yet it is possible to enter Anne's turmoil in more sympathetic ways. Her difficulty is a real one: how does one conduct personal life in a society whose social injustices overwhelm the kinds of private spaces privileged by Western middle-class life? Possibly, we can recognise Anne's hysteria as Benson's limitations as a novelist, and read through the 'stereotyping' to identify a dilemma that Benson, the autobiographer, conceals almost too well: her own pain in re-educating her individual socialisation and consciousness to find her identity in inseparable relationships with public responsibility. What I am suggesting is that At the Still Point has its significance not as an autonomous fiction. Rather, it is an integral part of what I described earlier as Benson's large autobiographical project.

As in A Far Cry, it is 'autobiography' that roots personal choice and opportunity to the constrictions and difficult liberations of political action, and, in spite of Anne's 'love story', the social dimension of At the Still Point could seem to be more compelling than the vicissitudes of the human heart. As one reviewer has put it, "the quivering sensibilities of the sixties...[have] a tenuous hold on our interest...But the day is saved by politics"(Wicomb;1989:17). It is Benson's re-creation of the political situation in the Eastern Cape that gives interest to Anne Dawson's responses. The mid-sixties was an era of vicious repression, and it is perhaps this social moment that the title refers to: the moment of seemingly invincible repression when resistance had to attempt, desperately, to come again to the surface: "At the Still Point, there the dance is...". It is the antagonism of government functionaries and the desperation of pockets of resistance that Benson, through Anne's 'witness' at the political trials, captures so accurately in the court-room sequences. In this passage the Prosecutor takes a cruel delight in humiliating the accused:

Now the Prosecutor's voice rose. "You saw all the police, the Saracen armoured cars ... And you knew of Bantu who burned their passes?"

"I heard. I would never burn mine. I need it, to keep my job."

"You need a pass to get a job?"

"Yes, Your Worship."

"To get a house?"

"Yes."

"You need a pass to go to the bank?"

"Yes."

"And if you go to another town?"

"Yes, Your Worship."

"So the pass is a burden?"

"No, Your Worship, not for me. It helps me."

...

"The white man is baas, is that not so, Jerry?"

"Yes."

...

"En jy is dood tevrede?" The prosecutor must have been carried away; quickly he corrected himself. "I mean, you are dead happy with your lot, Jerry?"

"Dead happy, Your worship." The voice was small. (1988:143.144)

Another perspective on individual lives bravely resisting state tyranny concerns Paula Waszynski and her notebook. Paula, a young, Jewish, South African, is serving a jail sentence for participating in acts of sabotage. Her notebook, which is included in the text with little explanation, contains various comments on responsibility and action in the face of racism. Paula draws parallels between the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis and the oppression of black South Africans by the apartheid government. Benson's point, of course, is that racism is a universal evil. Paula says that the Jews were partly responsible for their own extermination since by their "acceptance of degradation [they]...gave the SS the idea Jews would go meekly to the gas chambers". She continues: "Apathy led to the Nazis' gas chambers"(1988:42,46). The strained logic is meant as a sign of the young Paula's thwarted idealism and her



desperation. At the emotional level, the analogy makes its point about the cruelty of South Africa in the 'silent decade' of the 1960s. Again, Anne is forced to ponder her personal preoccupations in the context of social testimony.

Benson's intention, however, is not only to place Anne in the company of damaged resistance movements, however brave their ideals. Through her depiction of the Qaba family, she has Anne understand the difficult continuity of the struggle: the Qabas show a quiet determination not to be cowed. Samuel Qaba, an ageing clergyman, had been an early member of the ANC, and his daughter Beatrice, despite being on trial on charges under the Suppression of Communism Act, refuses to deny her allegiance to the ANC as a banned organisation:

...Beatrice was saying, "They searched my house time and again. Sergeant Mfaza and others ... they took my letters, my books. Even the picture I had of Chief Luthuli."

"A picture?"

"Three times I had to get a new one. Each time they came and took it..."(1988:158)

After Beatrice is jailed, her brother Nathaniel represents the cause, and his decision to leave the country for guerrilla training suggests, beyond the present 'still point', a new era in resistance politics. The sabotage of the early sixties had been defeated, and Nathaniel's decision to leave is presented as the only option available for a militant, young black man. As he says:

..."I had not learned before what it is, truly, to hate. And I wanted to kill, blindly. That's bad, wasteful. Afterward, I saw everything straight and clear. That's good. I saw that there is no way forward except through violence, only it must be controlled, it must be very carefully and deliberately planned.(1988:241)

The difference in style between these passages and those delineating Anne's sensibilities is marked, and perhaps indicates the areas - the public areas - where Benson has sure control over her writing. In fact, the confidence that political opposition will regroup in the near future can be seen in retrospect as prophetic.

The final pages of the book sustain tension in our worries as to Nathaniel's trustworthiness; thereafter by the excitement accompanying his escape. In this way, Benson not only manages to end the novel on an affirmative note, something which must have been difficult at the time given the apparently hopeless political position of those years, but she also manages to conjoin the themes of personal and political betrayal. Nathaniel's contempt for the *impimpis* (traitors) is mirrored, at another level, by Anne's self-loathing at her sexual betrayal of Matthew. Yet, Anne and Nathaniel are finally united in their sorrow at the news of Matthew's arrest and they determine, in their separate ways, to continue to struggle for freedom in a future South Africa.

It is Benson's ability to capture the social and political climate of the 1960s in this country that offers the real interest in At the Still Point. She is skilled at conveying the small details of time and place that evoke the atmosphere of an era, as when she describes a Johannesburg New Year's Eve:

Clang! Dang! Ang! Ang! ... ang ... ang ... an almighty clamorous din broke out of the darkness.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, laughing. "Have you forgotten? The servants everywhere, their traditional act, banging the telegraph poles."

...As we held hands and swayed to the thin heartiness of "Auld Lang Syne," again the clanging rang out in the night ...(1988:23)

She is equally revealing when she describes Anne's horror at the swift convictions in the pass office. She has Anne recall that:

At home, when the rest of the family were out or too busy, from the time I could learn to write well enough Amos and Cornelius would come to me: "Can I have a night pass, please, nonnie?" Then I would spell out on a piece of paper: *please pass native Cornelius* with the curfew time, our address, the date. And I would sign my name.(1988:53)

In these passages Benson writes with confidence. It is this close relationship between imaginative re-creation and the basis of fact that she supports in her afterword to the 1988 edition. Writing in the middle of the state of emergency, she offers a précis of the last twenty years of South African history, concentrating on the situation in the Eastern Cape. (As Wicomb points out "...the focus on the Eastern Cape is a welcome departure from the popular...perception of Soweto as representative of resistance in South Africa"(1989:18)). Here Benson is anxious to emphasise that her story is rooted in reality, and that many of the characters have real life templates: Dan Makhana was based on Govan Mbeki, Samuel Qaba on Canon James Calata, Kobie Versveld on Bram Fischer. The advantages of fiction have not entirely been ignored, however: "Incidentally, there was no Beatrice Qaba, just as there was no Nathaniel..."(1988:246). As these two characters - based no doubt on actual case histories - contribute to some of the most prescient episodes in the novel, the truths of the imagination and the 'historical record' are not easily separable. In short, Benson gains and loses in her decision to turn from the factual to the fictional mode and we cannot easily answer the question, which book is the more accurate reflection of Benson's true self? If Anne Dawson suggests a suppressed emotional side to Benson, the autobiographer of A Far Cry has opted, twenty years later, to confirm Anne's decision to seek personal fulfilment in social responsibilities.

As this study has argued, we need a special kind of approach to Benson's writing. She is not an 'artist', but a 'witness'; generic considerations are superseded by a unity of moral commitment; in all her books she is an 'autobiographer', but an autobiographer whose identity as a person is validated only in social and human interactions with a 'history' of struggles for justice and non-racialism. In all of this, Benson emerges not only as an admirable person, but as a characteristically South African writer. The challenge is for readers - and critics - to give due attention to the problem in her work of defining the individual life in a repressive society. Whatever her struggles - as a person and writer - A Far Cry suggests that she would not - could not - have created an egocentric and idiosyncratic personality. Instead, her 'unartistic' interests are the mark of her authenticity.

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